

FROM RECEIVER TO REMOTE CONTROL: THE TV SET



THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK

PERMANENT TELEVISION CENTER LTD.
FRONT ST.
NEW YORK 10027

FROM RECEIVER TO REMOTE CONTROL: THE TV SET

Conceived and Organized by Matthew Geller



THE NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, NEW YORK

From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set

The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
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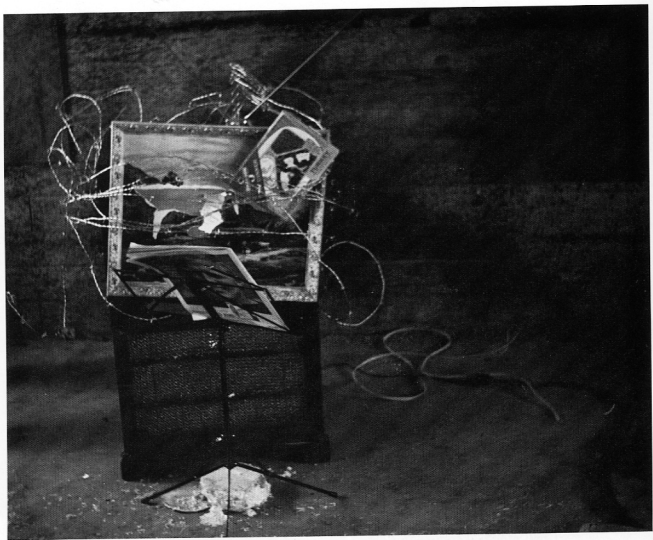
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The cover image is a high contrast reproduction of a still frame from a videotape made by Peter Collet which was part of a research study focusing on how people behave while they watch TV.

The individual views expressed in the exhibition and book are not necessarily those of the Museum.

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Wolf Vostell. Scene from the performance, *TV-Décollage* at the YAM festival (HAPPENINGS), organized by the Smolin Gallery in New Brunswick, New Jersey, May 19, 1963. Photograph © 1963 by Peter Moore.

The Anti-TV Set

John G. Hanhardt

This essay is a reflection on how artists first appropriated the television set into their artmaking. Two artists, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, are among the very first, and certainly the best known, to incorporate the TV set as an icon and object into their work. The projects examined here are Nam June Paik's one-artist exhibition, "Exposition of Experimental Television," held in March 1963 at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany, and two exhibitions by Wolf Vostell—a performance/happening at the Yam Festival in New Brunswick, New Jersey and his concurrent one-artist show at the Smolin Gallery in New York in May 1963. Both of these exhibition/events are closely related to these artists' earlier work in performance art and to the Fluxus movement. They were deliberate efforts on the part of Paik and Vostell to transform the institution of television through the destruction of the TV set.

Throughout the history of artists' video there has been a desire, expressed both implicitly and explicitly in writings and artwork, to rethink the institution of television by re-examining our assumptions about programming and the use of the TV set, and transform and appropriate the medium by fashioning alternative programs, circuits of distribution, and exhibitions of the apparatus itself. The insight expressed in these early artists' projects was to rethink, refashion, our perception of the medium's possibilities by confronting both its identity as a pervasive piece of household furniture and its ideology as a distribution system of words and images. These first efforts began where television begins for most people, namely with that technology of everyday life, the TV set in the home.

The art world in the late 1950s and early 1960s was witnessing a period of dramatic change. It was a time when artists rejected the idea of art as both exclusively defined by painting and determined by the lone poetic

genius of the artist seeking existential insight through painting abstract expressionist canvases. Certainly this was not the first time in twentieth century modernism that movements coalesced around the idea of rejecting traditional high art definitions and categories of what constitutes artmaking; nor was it the first movement to look beyond the figure of the artist as single creative genius. This was a multiplicity of movements—happenings, Fluxus, new dance, minimalism, performance art, music, avant-garde film—that were each, through a variety of media and materials, returning to the ordinary details of everyday life and retrieving as the material for creative expression the very stuff and experiences of quotidian existence.

At the same time these artists were turning to the materials of popular and everyday culture, American and European society was being rapidly altered by television as a form of popular entertainment and information delivery consolidated by monopolistic and state-run systems. The impact of television was similar to the way in which the cinema and the movie-going experience transformed the public's view of the world in the early part of the century. With television, people began to turn to an audio-visual device that was to construct a new public mythology alongside the movies. Television as a new medium delivering new images for daily consumption into the home was perceived as a threat to the movies because of its convenience, pervasiveness and low cost. The impact of television on popular and consumer culture was and remains enormous. This period, which saw the final victory of television as an industry and as a permanent fixture in both the private space of the home and the consciousness of the individual, was the same period in which artists turned their efforts toward reconnecting artmaking to everyday existence as a non-elitist activity and retrieving the details of daily life as the



Nam June Paik. Partial installation view of the exhibition, "Exposition of Music—Electronic Television" at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany, March 1963.



Nam June Paik. *Distorted TV*, 1963. Collection Dieter Rosenkranz, Wuppertal, West Germany.

raw material for art. The effort to remake the consumer image in Pop Art, to intervene in the processes and institutions of life in happenings, and Fluxus' creation of an alternative culture all occurred as television further colonized the public consciousness.

For artists working in the early 1960s, before the portable video camera and player were introduced by Sony into the U.S. market in 1965, the medium of television was completely mediated by the TV set. The iconicity of its programs and their perceptions were reinforced by the position of the television set in the home. The first artists to think about the medium recognized the TV set as the emblem or container of the medium, and thus saw a need to first deconstruct its authority as an object in order to ultimately create and work within its system.

It is this profound insight into television, not as a found object to be recontextualized as art, but as an icon to be broken of its authority and rebuilt out of its own parts, that distinguishes the work of Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, two artists in the Fluxus movement, a neo-Dada alliance of artists in New York and Europe which followed the call for a new art practice issued by its founder George Maciunas. Fluxus was an anarchic band of iconoclastic individuals who avoided the trap of mainstream culture and society as free-thinking individuals producing manifestos, performances, objects, texts, imaginary institutions, and projects all of which denied the status and stasis of culture.

In 1963 Vostell and Paik each had exhibitions in which the television set played a central role. Paik was a performance artist whose earlier projects involved the destruction of traditional musical instruments, in particular, pianos and violins. The centerpiece of Paik's exhibition, "Exposition of Experimental Television" in March at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany, was a room filled with

thirteen "prepared" televisions. Television sets were scattered about the room with their exteriors scratched and marked and the screens showing either distorted television programs or abstract line and wave patterns created by the direct manipulation of the mechanism of the set itself. Paik's show, with a bloody bull's head suspended above the entry way and mannequins, experimental musicmakers, and prepared pianos scattered about the space, was a shock and assault on the sensibilities of its German middle-class viewers. The link between the prepared piano and the television in Paik's work lies in television's replacement of the piano as the most popular medium in the home for entertainment. Paik's appropriation of the television set is also an extension of his interest in altering our perception of traditional, standardized cultural forms.

Paik's defacement of the piano changed the look and sound of the instrument: its altered keyboard and strings, covered with doll's heads, barbed wire, and other debris of the culture, created unconventional, anti-classical sounds. Paik desanctified the piano and removed it from the pedestal of high culture. As in "One for Violin Solo," in which he destroyed a violin in a single gesture, thus producing its final sound as his concert, Paik transformed the piano as instrument and cultural artifact. In an extension of this strategy, Paik removed the television set from its position within the home and stripped it of its signifiers and traditional meanings as an object.

"I utilized intensely the live transmission of normal program, which is the most variable optical and semantical event, in the 1960s. . . 13 sets suffered 13 sorts of variation in their VIDEO - HORIZONTAL - VERTICAL units. I am proud to say that all 13 sets actually changed their inner circuits. No two sets had the same kind of technical operation. Not one is the simple blur, which occurs when you turn the vertical

and horizontal control-button at home."

As with his prepared pianos, Paik denied television its standardized content and appearance by renovating the set's interior and exterior, thus transforming each standardized instrument into his own individual instrument. When Paik began in the late 1960s to produce videotapes he still adhered to his interest in electronic images as an extension of his first involvement in electronic music and performance instruments. Paik's long career and seminal position in the history of artist's television/video sprang from his first prepared televisions at the Gallerie Parnass.

Wolf Vostell's early performance projects were actions designed for public spaces; he was also the creator of the publication "d  collage," which used the mass media format of the newspaper to create a new form of anti-newspaper. Vostell's installation at the Smolin Gallery in New York, May 1963, is directly related to Paik's prepared televisions. Vostell employed magnets and manipulated the television so as to transform the received signal, and fashion his own electronic images. Vostell focused on the television set as an object by grouping televisions together with office furniture in the gallery, thus reflecting on the television as the conduit of information and information processing. Like Paik, Vostell manipulated the image to offer the concept of the individual creating his own programming and fashioning a commentary on the TV set and its content. As in his "d  collage" newspaper made up of pieces of paper, magazine clippings, and artists' statements, Vostell employed a boldly improvisational layout and design in his prepared television sets.

The Yam Festival event organized by Alan Kaprow, George Brecht, and Robert Watts took place on George Segal's farm in New Brunswick, New Jersey, in May 1963. It featured a "TV D  collage" event by

Wolf Vostell. Vostell's performance began with a television set covered with barbed wire, its screen reframed by a picture frame, and with a music stand placed in front of it. In the performance, the TV set was first carried outside; Vostell then used a jackhammer and a shovel to dig a hole in which the body of the TV was buried. Vostell's action was a symbolic effort to eliminate television and bury its physical body. This anti-ceremony both acknowledged and denied television through its primary and most recognizable form, the TV set. Vostell's text for the event is a graphic set of instructions to engage and transform the TV set.

Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell influenced each other as co-participants in a large international community of artists. Paik went on to shape video's history as its most important and influential artist. Vostell, although he did not play a continuing role in video art, demonstrated in this and related projects, especially his performances and Vietnam pieces from the 1970s, a social and political desire to understand the authority and ideological controls apparent in contemporary history. Both artists understood that television begins in the public's mind with the authority of the TV set itself as a conduit for the programs unfolding daily on the screen. Paik and Vostell's efforts to demystify the public discourse of television as well as the practice of artmaking constituted a radical step in the history of video and art. By confronting the instrumentality of television, their work constituted both a materialist critique and an anti-high art activity. They confronted the individual with the detritus of consumer culture in an effort to understand art as a living presence, not as a dead tradition or unquestioned commodity of the marketplace. ■

"EAT WELL . . . BUT WISELY! . . ."

is
Dé-collage
Comestible
possible

?

Throw a big whipped - cream Cake to the TV and —>
—> smudge it on the surface of the TV
—> while the programm
—> is going on

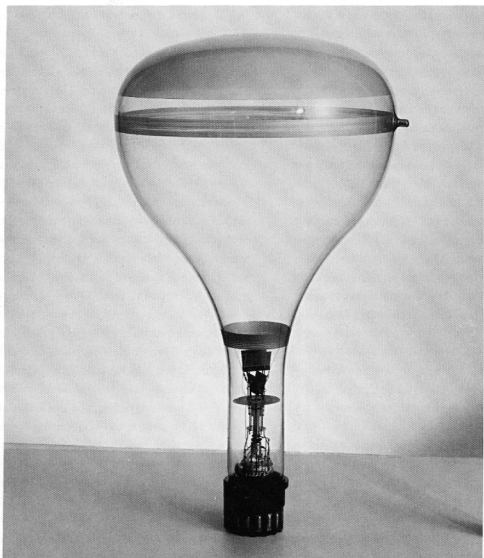
—>
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--- then decorate the
TV with barbed wire

FUN TO SHOW
FUN TO TRADE
FUN TO COLLECT

Erase
a cover
of a
magazine

|
v
give
it to see
the
TV set



An early cathode ray tube, c. 1939.

The End of the Television Receiver

Margaret Morse

The box on display in the living room—the body of television—has been technologically superseded by video projectors and liquid crystal displays. Television no longer requires a three-dimensional body of its own. Though TV sets—be they mahogany or plastic—proliferate numerically into every room in the house and qualitatively beyond, into schoolrooms, courtrooms, legislatures, churches and stadia, the television receiver is already a nostalgic object. The fantasy of collective individualism embodied in the suburb-television-freeway-mall complex¹ may be displaced as well by an immaterial culture projected in light, commonly known as virtual reality. The following speculates on the imbrication of disembodied television with the computer and the cultural implications of cyberspace, or computer-generated virtual worlds as metaphors which we can walk through, touch, hear and see.²

It is true that we ordinarily think of the TV set less as a body than as container or frame for transmitted, not source, images and sounds. Indeed it is *as if* (but not really) the set were hollow within like a microwave or a box of salesman's samples or a stove for cool fire. Inside the hollow television, the ultimate box, is a personal reliquary for fetish objects or sacra at the crossroads of everyday life, the commodity world and our common culture.

But the TV box is also a shape the size of an ersatz person in a medium shot or close-up. Like minimal sculpture, the box confronts the visitor in a shared space and real time of changing light and shadow³—except the TV sculpture is its own light source and manufactures its own temporal events. And, in the case of television, the sculpture does more than simulate human shape and scale, it is a container for talking heads: a machine-subject importunes us with the power of speech. The spot in front of the television is

the virtual space of a simulated conversation we share with our subject-machine, a space which we can occupy or not, at any time. The TV set as utility for story-telling slaves supplies charms against loneliness on demand, offering fictions of a world (real or imaginary) shared without responsibility, at the price of imbricating our dreams with the fetishism of commodities.⁴

The television receiver as box is gradually being displaced by the computer display terminal, integrated with the telephone, the typewriter and drawing tablet, the library, the game and bulletin board. And, even now, you can install a board and program to receive television on the computer screen. Here the ersatz person has set up shop again, interacting with us with ever more sophistication, but nonetheless virtually. The body of the computer becomes a projection of our second self, co-mingled with the projections of other subjects in messages from an ambiguously inner-outer other world. Video projection allows this other world and mixed self-other subjectivity to be projected out of the box onto our real conditions of existence.

The logic of the box as container is quite different from the logic of projection. Projected or liquid crystalline images are surfaces of light, not bodies. Lovely fine-grained phantoms in saturated colors lack a body or frame to contain them or a luminous path to betray their origin. Their scale can be superhuman in larger-than-life projection, while liquid crystals can be miniatures, worn like jewelry. Like shadows of stained glass without the need of window or sun, they are easily wrapped over any architectural feature or object. An architecture of giant or miniature skins of light can be condensed over walls or objects in real space: even now, video walls can move and speak with human voices in the mall. Images need not coincide with their frame or support: with the help of a computer, an

image can be broken over any shape in any size, whole or in a fragment.

But skins of light don't necessarily require any reality support: On the freeway, we can soon anticipate the appearance of the virtual video screen or "head up display" which will float in a driver's field of vision like a freeway sign.⁵ Virtual television can float in our space like a squeeze frame over the anchor's shoulder in the news. It is *as if* we were virtually *inside* the presentation of television events. Our imaginary move inside the television has been anticipated daily for decades by all the 2001-style "star gate" sequences from logos and Max Headroom to *Peewee's Playhouse* that seem to zoom us into the television set. Star gates have already migrated into real space in video art: floors may open like rabbit holes into animate worlds—at least virtually.⁶

Phantoms or skins of light do not inhabit real time. Manipulated by camcorder and VCR, images can be repeated, sped up, slowed down, edited (in real or unreal time) and submitted to substitution, multiplication or undeath (i.e. reversible unbeing) with a single remote gesture. Furthermore, sound is freed from an acoustic perspective and source, to simulate itself in other realms in sampled and layered complexity. As a result, the recorded world may be retrievable and instantly recognizable, displaceable, stackable in thin wafers of dense sound, delightful. So, a fantasy of a world without gravity, space or time which we inhabit *bodily* is elaborated by the disappearance of the box.

It is *as if* our symbolic realm were no longer contained in and by objects, the written page, or echoed in acoustic space. Our box of symbols and words is emptied out, spilling husks of speech and gestures out into the air. Inside has become outside. And outside has become inside, without a frame to call us home from dream time.⁷

We may be inside television, but we are not contained: this inside is a world without edges or ends, a space without place, where planes overlap and intersect without boundaries or frames. The prospect looms of psychic regression to a stage even earlier than the cave. To inhabit metaphors made of light may put the most fundamental distinctions—present/absent, living/dead—at risk in a world of mundane magical transformations and commodity terror. Without the shelter of the niche or box *from* as well as for words, language can become undead, images can become vampires.

But though it seems that projected worlds are psychically preparing us for the weightlessness of outer space—our bodies act nonetheless in real space and irreversible time on earth. It may be fair to say that there is an unacknowledged and adverse relation between the image-world and the earth it displaces, now ugly and deprived of desire. This earth enmity is not assuaged by make-overs with image skins advertising for the environment. Coming to terms with virtual reality is a new task of art. Perhaps only the contrast of kinetic and virtual information, of gravity and phantom light can locate a hard place on which to stand—a task I foresee for video installation art.⁸ ■

NOTES

1. See my "Ontology of Everyday Distraction: the Freeway, the Mall and Television," in: *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp, University of Indiana Press, forthcoming.

2. Computers are the source of virtual realities in the strictest sense. Cf. Timothy Binkley, "Camera Fantasia: Computer Visions of Virtual Realities," *Millennium 20/21* (Fall/Winter 1988-1989), 6-45. It should be added that the virtual camera which produces a projected world is not compelled to sim-

ulate the properties of perspectival space and linear time. Yet, computers require visual metaphors (i.e. television and beyond, to a multidimensional cyberspace) to make formless data perceivable and comprehensible. See Peter H. Lewis, "Put on Your Data Glove and Goggles and Step Inside," *New York Times*, May 20, 1990, p. F8. Currently available software (Autodesk, Inc.) enables users to "walk through structures which exist only as data within the computer." Of course, an interface is required, an inversion of Siegfried's helmet for making the wearer invisible—goggles which make the world invisible and displace the visual field with a computer-generated vision. Data gloves allow one to feel information as a metaphor given a literal shape, if only a virtual existence. The article anticipates virtual workplaces organized, sad to say, by "the office metaphor."

3. See Michael Fried in "Art and Objecthood," *Aesthetics Today*, eds. Morris Philipson and Paul Gudel (New York: NAL, 1980), pp. 214-239, for a seminal description of the anthropomorphic and theatrical qualities of minimalist sculpture.

4. See my description of "the fiction of discourse" in: "Talk, Talk, Talk: The Space of Discourse in Television News, Sportcasts, Talk Shows and Advertising," *Screen* 26 No. 2 (March-April 1985), 1-15.

5. Edward E. Duensing, "Television on the Move: In-Car Video Screen Small But Critics Question Safety," *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1989, Part II, p. 3. The article describes the new technology recently patented by Jay Schiffman of Auto Vision Associates in Ferndale, Michigan.

6. See, for instance, the installation work of Judith Barry, *Maelstrom: Max Laughs and Adam's Wish*, both 1988/89, with floor and ceiling star gates, respectively.

7. See the discussion of Joseph Cornell's boxes in Edmund Burke Feldman's chapter on "Niches, Boxes and Grottoes," in *Varieties of Visual Experience* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1987), p. 347, where "the frame takes us home." Feldman also refers to Kenny Scharf's *Extravaganza Televisione* 1984 as "the ultimate box," p. 349.

8. For further speculation on the cultural function of video installation art, see my article "Video Installation Art: the Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between," in: *Illuminating Video*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Fifer, Aperture Press, forthcoming, November 1990.